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“The Boys’ Club”: A Lost Story

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A research paper completed for English 4710. This is an advanced undergraduate course focused on the study of a particular genre and its ability to articulate meaning in historical, social, and/or literary contexts. This paper is part of the Children's Literature genre series.

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Throughout history, children’s books have been seen as special types of stories that impact the thoughts of children from generation to generation. There are many different types of children’s books, including classics which are told time after time and stories which are introduced and slowly fade into the background. One publication that used to be popular for children was *St. Nicholas Magazine*. This periodical contained various stories for juveniles to learn from and enjoy. However, many of these stories are no longer read by many individuals and are not commonly told by parents to their children. An example of one of these “lost” stories is Charles Bernard’s “The Boys’ Club,” which can be found in Volume 12, Number 6 of *St. Nicholas Magazine*. This story can be classified as Victorian-era children’s literature and possesses many of the qualities of children’s stories of that time period. It also ties in moral lessons in an attempt to teach the young readers how to behave in society. Although books for boys are typically thought of as stories filled with adventure and freedom from rules, this particular piece highlights how clubs for young and underprivileged boys can be used for socialization of the lower classes and to maintain social control.

In nineteenth-century society, there were strict societal expectations in place even for young children, especially boys. Some of these guidelines are seen in “The Boys’ Club” in the rules that the boys must follow and the manners they must uphold. To even be in the club there are certain behaviors that the boys must follow. To begin with, “the boy must apply for a ticket

and this ticket is only good for a month” (Bernard 443). Unfortunately, if a boy misbehaves, he will lose his ticket and, therefore, his privileges into the club. Likewise, “all the boys who show that they wish to do the right thing, and treat the club and each other properly, have their tickets renewed every month” (Barnard 443). These rules are outlined throughout the story to teach the young readers that they should behave and use their manners in order to receive rewards just as the young boys in the story do. Likewise, the boys in the club are permitted to have as much fun as they please; however, it is regulated fun, given that they cannot do certain activities, including play tag and follow-the-leader, because “those are out-of-door games, and not fit for a young gentleman’s club” (Barnard 443). If they want to play these games the boys must go outside and “can not come again to the club till they learn how young gentlemen behave in the house” (Bernard 443). As readers, we see that the fun only goes to a certain extent because of the rules in place to promote proper behavior. Cleanliness is also emphasized. According to literary historian Seth Lerer, “boys, as Lord Chesterfield advised early on, have a duty to maintain clarity of word and deed and to “cut up” properly. Their dress, their cleanliness, their self-attentions all contribute to an ideal of a healthy, social world” (Lerer 171). In the story, one of the boys has dirty hands and is told to “go to that door over there, [where] you will find a young man, aged ten, who will give you soap, water, and a towel” (Barnard 443). Likewise, one of the main activities that the boys do at the club is read. In the story it is emphasized that many of the boys enjoy reading and that “half a dozen little fellows are reading the enticing lists, and off they go to the librarian, and present their cards for their books” (Barnard 442). Since society encourages literacy and reading, the young boys reading this story will get the idea that reading is a fun thing to do and in turn will want to read as well. It is evident that the club is targeted to boys that are of a lower class. Society at this time would strive to ease the class differences through education

and social control. These clubs were created in an effort to aid in assimilation and promote social advancement of these underprivileged boys into middle-class society. All in all, throughout the story, the boys' club is seen as a place of freedom and fun; however, there are also rules in place regarding behaviors and manners that help teach the young readers to behave like the characters in the story and in turn they will be happy and rewarded just like the boys who are members of the club.

Societal rules and ideals play a large role in this particular children's story. Through the actions of the boys at the club, young readers see how they should act and behave as well. According to Lerer, "schools all have their slang, and what books such as *Tom Brown's Schooldays* do is educate the reader as they educate their hero. Reading such books becomes a process of socialization" (Lerer 154). This is seen in the story in that the young reader is learning to behave as the characters are learning as well. Nowadays, we typically think of classic literature for boys as portraying tales of adventure and freedom from the constricting rules of society. However, this story really shows how society back then valued good manners and really drew on being well behaved and a proper gentlemen, whereas running around and disobeying rules was frowned upon. Lerer states that "the traditions of classical, medieval, and early modern instruction iterate advice to sons: behave well, keep clean, speak clearly, mind your studies" (Lerer, 152). It was commonly seen that the society at that time incorporated moral lessons in children's stories. Society would use these stories to try and teach children how they should act and behave. Society as a whole wanted to assist in the proper upbringing of the children in any way possible. In the story, after the boys' club was formed, "other folks became interested in the good work and wished to assist in it" (Barnard 441). This demonstrates that it was a societal effort as a whole to work towards the raising of children in an atmosphere that followed their

social rules. Society also valued education and reading, which was seen through their donations of “books and cards and picture-papers, and *St. Nicholas*” (Barnard 441). In addition, society valued helping others, which is seen in the end of the story when the author asks the young readers if they “have any spare games and old but really good books?” and “how would they like to send them to the Boys’ Club for the use of the small fellows of the East side” (Barnard 441). Overall, society as a whole strived and contributed to help raise children to possess good manners, act properly, and help others. These clubs for boys would aid in the socialization of lower-class boys into middle-class American society by teaching them manners and how to behave as gentlemen.

This piece fits in with the Victorian-era children’s literature. This story in particular fits into the genre of books for boys and possesses many of the qualities of books of that time period. During this time children were often seen as innocent and childhood could be seen as an escape from reality (Wadsworth). This is demonstrated in the story when the room where the boys would meet was described as being “a happy escape from the street” (Barnard 441). The boys could come here and enjoy just being children and not have to worry about what is happening in the inner-city neighborhood of their club’s meeting space. Likewise, Victorian society saw freedom in childhood. It was stated that the boys of the club possessed this freedom in that they could do as they wished and “could talk and laugh just as much as they pleased” (Barnard 441). It was also emphasized in the story that when they were at the club they were free to be just children in that the club “is not a school; it is not a lecture-room nor any kind of a meeting” (Barnard 441). This demonstrates that the object of this club was to allow the children to do as they please and simply be children. It is stated that the club is a place “where every fellow can read, or play games, or talk, or tell stories, or do anything that is regular out and out fun, and not

mischievous” (Barnard 441-442). Another area where the story fits into Victorian era children’s literature is in its dialogue between author and reader (Wadsworth). In the end of the story, the author directly asks the young readers questions to promote interaction with the reader. This helps the young audience connect more to the story and feel involved with it. Lastly, and most evidently, this piece fits into Victorian-era literature in that it was a story meant for a particular gender of audience. In the Victorian period, there were numerous books that were written for a boy audience and books written for a girl audience (Wadsworth). This story was written for young boys in an attempt to teach them how they should behave. In total, this story possesses many attributes that classify it as Victorian-era children’s literature.

Lastly, the illustrations assist in telling the story of the boys’ club. A few illustrations seem to stand out in particular, including the picture of Rad Statfelder as he is standing in the park examining the sign “keep off the grass” (Barnard 440). This picture demonstrates just how depressed the young boy is that there is nothing fun to do anywhere, even in the park, which is typically a place filled with exciting things to do. This illustration allows the readers to get a sense of the emotions that the character is feeling at that point in the story. Another key illustration is of the boys reading and playing games at the boys’ club (Barnard 441). In this illustration the boys appear to be having a lot of fun at the club. It is also worth noting that, as society desires, they are being well behaved and are clean and wearing nice clothes. Usually when one thinks of boys playing and having fun, they imagine them in old clothes and getting dirty; however, this picture demonstrates that at that time when having fun it was important to be well behaved and well dressed. The last illustration that stands out is the picture of the boys all watching a magic show. This picture is important because it portrays how their fun activities were orderly and controlled, which is especially evident from the three older men keeping order

in the back of the room. The illustration also makes evident the ideals of society of order and controlled fun for young boys. In conclusion, the illustrations play a key role in portraying to the readers the ideals of society at that time in regards to boys and having fun and allowing the readers to get a clear picture of what the club and the boys looked like.

Overall, this story can be classified as Victoria-era children's literature and possesses many of the qualities of children's stories of that time period. It also ties in moral lessons in an attempt to teach the young readers how to behave in society. Although books for boys are typically thought of as stories filled with adventure and freedom from rules, this particular piece highlights how clubs for young boys can be used for socialization of the lower classes and to maintain social control. Throughout the story it is demonstrated that society values good behavior and manners as well as cleanliness and literacy. These are taught through the way the boys in the story act while at the boys' club. Also, it is seen that the story can be classified under Victorian-era children's literature due to the underlying views that children are innocent and childhood is an escape from reality. Likewise, the story uses the technique of dialogue between the author and reader and is a piece that was created for a young boy's audience. Although the story may no longer be read by many individuals, it is a piece that should be taken into consideration when analyzing how society thought young boys and children in general should behave.

Works Cited

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